

Walpole Valley Farms, a Farm of Distinction

by Jewel McKenzie



Walpole, New Hampshire - Passionate. That describes Jackie Caserta, co-owner and Innkeeper of the Inn at Valley Farms in Walpole, New Hampshire. Since 1998, when her brother, Chris, and their parents purchased the former dairy farm, restoring and running the property has been a three-generation family affair. Farming, however, was not the initial priority when purchasing the property, according to Jackie. Instead, the primary motivation was to save the 105 acres from development. Jackie and Chris

Caserta felt strongly about preserving the health of the land, as they grew up on bordering property. Once they gained ownership, the family faced the decision of how to use the land. First priority was given to renovating the 1774 Colonial home, which had fallen into disrepair. In 1999, the Casertas opened The Inn at Valley Farms, a bed and breakfast. Since that time, the Inn has expanded to sleep up to 28 guests with three elegant private rooms, two guest cottages and a farm house option for visitors.

Following the establishment of the Inn, the family turned its attention to building Walpole Valley Farms, the Inn's complementary, and partner business. The catalyst behind choosing to farm occurred when Chris became ill and was forced to examine what he was eating. Chris, who runs

*"Motivation came from seeing the potential to have a profound impact in feeding our local friends and neighbors with wholesome food and knowledge".
– Chris Caserta, Walpole Valley Farms*

Joel Salatin, owner of Polyface Farm, has been hailed for his innovative and sustainable agricultural practices for direct marketing of meat, grass-fed beef, pastured-poultry, and a rotational system that allows animals to operate more closely as they would in nature. He has been highlighted in the documentary Food, Inc. and Michael Pollan's book, The Omnivore's Dilemma.

the farm business with his wife Caitlin, drew inspiration and practical skills from a subsequent visit with Virginia-based farmer, Joel Salatin. Salatin's commitment to sustainable agriculture and the Caserta's desire to grow their own food for their families and neighbors shaped Walpole Valley Farms' development and current operations.

Following Salatin's philosophy, Chris has the beef cattle, pigs, goats, chickens and turkeys out on the pasture doing much of "the work". Not only does this eliminate chemical fertilizer use, which bolsters higher profits, but it also conserves the landscape and produces more nutritious products for customers. While Jackie acquired organic certification upon purchase of the property, they no longer hold official certification but continue to follow all of the standards. Both the Inn and Walpole Valley Farms strictly use compost that is generated on-farm from animal manure, bedding, and food

waste on their fields and gardens.

When walking through the grounds, guests of the Walpole Valley Farms will see serene views of cows grazing in the pasture. Depending on the time of year, they may also see the “Eggmobile” and “chicken tractors”, which are part of the sustainable agricultural methods employed by the farm. Some practices incorporated on the farm are part of the family’s work with the USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (USDA-NRCS). The USDA-NRCS has provided financial and technical assistance for practices that include Vegetable Growing Season Extension and Intensive Rotational Grazing.



Working with **Heidi Konesko**, Soil Conservationist in the Walpole Field Office, Jackie and Chris developed a Conservation Plan to enhance their operation’s sustainability. Under the **Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)** and with the assistance of **Bruce Clement**, a Grazing Specialist under NRCS’s Technical Service Provider Program, Chris was able to develop a detailed and comprehensive Prescribed Grazing Plan with flexibility to add and change as the needs of the

farm and markets change. Then Chris used the EQIP program again to build the infrastructure needed to carry out the grazing plan. This included fencing 45 acres, developing a livestock watering system, creating buffers between the pasture and the farm’s ponds and wetlands, and stabilizing stream crossings. NRCS also assisted the farm in completing a Forest Management Plan.

What are the benefits of a Seasonal High Tunnel?

- 1.) They can increase plant and soil quality
- 2.) They can reduce pesticide use and leaf disease
- 3.) They can save energy
- 4.) They can benefit local growers’ efforts by enhancing the availability of food throughout the year, especially in the colder months!
- 5.) They can bolster the economic health of

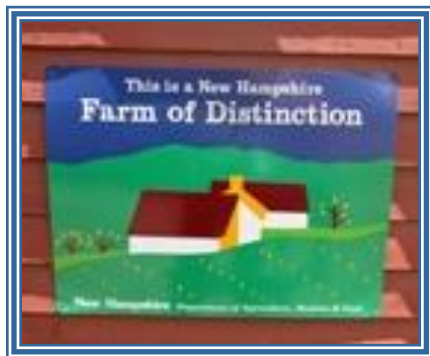
Prior to running the Inn at Valley Farms, Jackie was a Recycling Market Development Specialist for the NH Department of Economic Development. Chris maintains his position as a financial planner for another family business. Both Jackie and Chris reside on the property with their families. Jackie tends to the Inn’s guests, harvesting items right from her garden to cook decadent farm-fresh breakfasts. “Food is a conversation starter and a way to reconnect”, she says as she reflects on common threads that she has seen amongst her guests. And, with the increased demand for local food nationwide, the Inn at Valley Farms and Walpole Valley Farms have much to offer.

As part of the 2011 EQIP contract, they have laid the plans and prepared the grounds for installation of a **High Tunnel** for the fall of 2011. The high tunnel functions much like a

giant cold frame and is intended to extend the growing season and allow a diversity of crops to be grown, which Jackie anticipates harvesting for the Farmers' Market, their local partners, and the Inn's guests.

In addition to the "environmentally responsible lodging", the Casertas have expanded their farm to include a variety of animals. Available products include 100% Grass-fed & Finished Beef, Pasture-raised Chickens, Pasture-raised Turkeys, Pasture-raised Eggs, Woodland Pigs, and Cashmere Goats. (During a mid-July visit, the entire family was in the middle of its "chicken harvest", which is the on-site processing of chickens.) These items can be found at the Walpole Farmers' Market, through various local businesses, and on the farm.

In her organically-managed gardens, Jackie maintains a wide variety of quality herbs and heirloom vegetables which she encourages guests to pick and use during their stay. A quarter-acre vegetable and flower garden is kept behind the Inn. Here, Jackie employs no-till gardening methods – a system of permanent paths and permanent beds meant to increase soil fertility and plant production while simultaneously reducing weeding.



Successes

The family's hard work and commitment to preserving the farming culture of the site and area has been worth the effort, as seen by the increasing number of requests for weddings, special events, school tours, and business retreats. In recent years, they have seen a notable increase in couples as well as families from both the US and abroad looking for a farm experience. While the bucolic location and surroundings of the Inn foster a sought-after sense of tranquility, Jackie

attributes the desire for a more intimate understanding of food and the educational components located throughout the farm as added reasons that the property is a destination of choice. Guests and customers can visit the property informally and through agritourism events, public tours, and an on-site interpretive center created in partnership with Antioch Graduate School students.

While Jackie comments on her support of their 500-acre neighbor, Alyson's Orchards, for a variety of favorite and unique fruit, it should also be noted that Walpole Valley Farms has experienced an increased demand for its "local" products. Possibly due to the "buy local" movement, area restaurants, grocers, and businesses have also requested more of their items. At this time, the majority of the farm products are sold to individual guests and customers.

The Inn was named **Environmental Champion by the New Hampshire Sustainable Lodging and Restaurant Program** in 2009. It was the first Monadnock Region business to earn the title, which sprung from the conservation-minded practices on the property.

This past spring, the Inn and Farm were named the **2010 Monadnock Region Green Business of the Year** for their conservation efforts. This prestigious award recognized both businesses for practices such as comprehensive recycling and composting including vermicomposting (using worms to turn organic waste into nutrient-rich compost), extensive use of locally- grown food, use of greencleaning products, recycled content paper products, energy efficient appliances and lighting throughout the Inn as well as on-farm sustainable practices.

From hosting farming workshops to forming the Monadnock Community Market Co-op, the Cheshire County Conservation District (CCCD) is putting local food on the map. For information on the CCCD and its programs, visit:
<http://www.cheshireconservation.org/home>

Most recently, Walpole Valley Farms and Alyson's Orchards were awarded the **2011** title, **New Hampshire Farm of Distinction**. The program, started in 1997, is administered by the State of New Hampshire's Department of Agriculture and recognizes farms that demonstrate exceptional cleanliness and operational upkeep.

Walpole Valley Farms is a family-owned and operated farm in the heart of the Connecticut River Valley in the great State of New Hampshire. Three generations of family and some great hired help run the daily operation.

For more information:

NH- USDA-NRCS: <http://www.nh.nrcs.usda.gov/>
The Inn at Valley Farms: <http://www.innatvalleyfarms.com/>
Walpole Valley Farms: <http://www.walpolevalleyfarms.com/>